

WILD TRIBES IN VANCOUVER.

THE general belief prevalent among travellers, scientific men, and the pioneers of civilisation everywhere is, that savage races are gradually disappearing, not only under the influence of the vices and diseases introduced among them by white men, and, in shamefully frequent instances, the cruelty perpetrated upon them in the interests of civilisation and commerce, but by a natural law, inexplicable indeed, but indisputably evident in its action. The study of their condition acquires, from this fact, an additional interest, and is invested with a poetical charm for the imagination, which exceeds the practical attraction of learning their condition with a view to improving it, and assimilating their notions of life and the best means of its enjoyment with those of the civilised intruders on their territory. People who do not know or care anything about the matter pronounce, in an off-hand manner, all savages to be alike; but those who read the various experiences of travellers and explorers, know that an infinite variety in national characteristics, in habits, in intellectual potentialities, in belief, in barbarism, and in physical features, may be found within the two extremes of savage life, as depicted by Cooper and Sir Samuel Baker—between the Delaware and the Gytch tribes, and will readily believe that the celebrated novelist, who elevated the former into a noble race, was not much more, though more humanely prejudiced in favour of the savage, than the distinguished traveller, who denies to the latter the privileges of humanity, and proclaims his inferiority to the brute.

Of one species of this great variety, Mr Sproat,* who, in 1860, took possession, in the name of her Majesty, of Alberni, on the western coast of Vancouver's Island, gives a curious and interesting account. This is the Aht race, hitherto almost as little known as the Andaman islanders, and possessing certain striking traits of character and national history curious to contemplate, considering the utter isolation of their lives. It is pleasant to know that these simple, harmless, intelligent people were not cruelly treated by the English settlers. Their land was not forcibly taken from them; they

* *Scenes and Studies of Savage Life.* By Gilbert Malcolm Sproat. London: Smith, Elder, & Co.

were only obliged to sell it, notwithstanding their mild and reasonable protest. There is something pathetic in the story of Mr Sproat's interview with the chiefs of the Seshahs, when he went to announce the inevitable arrival of the King-George-men (for these unlearned people hold 'King-George' a synonym for all English royalty), and the old man answered his greeting thus: "Our families are well, our people have plenty of food; but how long this will last we know not. We see your ships, and hear things which make our hearts grow faint. They say that more King-George-men will soon be here; and will take our land, our firewood, our fishing-ground; that we shall be placed on a little spot, and shall have to do everything according to the fancies of the King-George-men." I answered: "It is true that more King-George-men are coming—they will soon be here; but your land will be bought at a fair price." "We don't wish to sell the land, or the water; let your friends stay in their own country." To which I rejoined: "My great chief, the high chief of the King-George-men, seeing that you do not want your land, orders that you shall sell it. It is of no use to you. The trees you do not need; you will fish and hunt as you do now, and collect firewood, planks for your houses, and cedar for your canoes. The white men will give you work, and buy your fish and oil." "Ah, but we don't care to do as the white men wish." "Whether or not," said I, "the white men will come. All your people know that they are your superiors; they make the things which you value. You cannot make muskets, blankets, or bread. The white men will teach your children to read printing, and to be like themselves." "We do not want the white man. He steals what we have. We wish to live as we are."

Complaint and remonstrance were vain. The King-George-men came, and a civilised settlement was formed in the midst of the Seshahs almost immediately; the poor natives looking on, helpless and unadmiring, at buildings, wharfs, steam-engines, ploughs, oxen, horses, and pigs, all equally unknown to them. The scene of the new settlement, from which the Indians quietly moved away, but to only a short distance, abounds in natural beauties. The localities inhabited by the Aht tribes are the three large sounds on the west coast of Vancouver's Island, whose names are Nitinaht, Klah-oh-quaht, and Nootka. Nitinaht includes the Alberni settlement. The sounds throw out arms in various directions inland; and into these arms, coming from mountain-lakes known to a few Indians only, shallow rivers flow, which are diversified by falls and rapids, and deepen here and there when pent up between mountains which approach each other closely. Mr Sproat thus describes the scenery, with which the natives harmonise as little, perhaps, as the African savages with their beautiful tropical land, though they are decidedly not degraded, considered as savages: "The broad surface of the sounds is studded with rocky islets of various sizes, covered with hemlock, cedar, and pine trees, which also, the pine predominating, clothe the rugged sides of the hills, that rise from the shore into peaks or serrated ridges. . . . I found the best time to linger in a canoe on these wide bays was just about the twilight, when the harsh, sharp lines of the surrounding scenery were softened, and the shadows of islet and mountain lengthened over the singularly clear water. Among the islands, and on the shore of the sounds, there

is an endless number and variety of passages, creeks, bays, and harbours, of all shapes and sizes, which can be discovered only on a near approach. Many of these marine nooks are deep enough to float the largest ship, and far down through the pellucid water, never moved by storms, gardens of zoophytes are visible at the bottom."

The ocean-coast outside has different features, and the large waves of the North Pacific break upon it, even in calm weather, with a fierce grandeur, and roar sullenly among the caverns. The coast is not considered dangerous, but in the winter, storms are prevalent. "The line of the raging surf on the beach extends for miles to some rocky cape, over which the waves foam, the spray being borne upwards, and flung through the air. Wild black clouds approach the earth, and are hurried along by the blast. There is nowhere any sign of life now; the Indians crowd together in their houses, and the birds huddle behind the sheltering rocks." The interior of the Aht country is pine-forest, dense, boundless, undulating, diversified by lakes, which are in fact 'tarns,' wonderfully fine, gloomy, and impressive, such forests and such lakes as naturally associate themselves with our most romantic notions of the wild Indian life. The intensity of the solitude of these hidden places—solitude so unendurable to the civilised man, so dear to the savage, sullenly tracking his prey—is deeply impressive. All is silence, but for the melancholy cry of the loon, or the breaking of a decayed branch in the woods. In the night, the traveller, resting under a cedar-tree, sees the lightning-flash illumine the shaggy mountain before him, and when the blazing glare comes again, marks the long line through the trees made by the avalanche in rolling down for thousands of feet into the lake. He watches the draperies of mist moving upwards from the gloomy falls, and that cataract, just seen hanging like a silver thread to the cap of clouds on the far summit, which strikes the eye again, expanded into a torrent, a thousand feet lower at the exposed turn of some ravine, and then is heard rushing into the narrow lake. Among these forests, so dense that not one tree in fifty struggles successfully for its share of sunshine, live the strange people, who, in a space of time brief, when measured by the lapses of history, will in all probability have ceased to exist, will have disappeared, almost unchronicled, leaving no monuments, not even ruins, to testify to their having existed. The Ahts are a better-looking race than savages generally, and the men have well-formed limbs. Corpulence is unknown amongst them, and any physical deformity is very rare. They are wonderfully dexterous and indefatigable oarsmen; and their powers of endurance, in any work to which they are accustomed, are very great. Mr Sproat has had men with him from sunrise to sunset, whilst exploring new districts, where the walking tried his powers to the utmost, and they scarcely seemed to feel the exertion; and could also bear the want of food for a long time without becoming exhausted.

The moral deformities imputed to them by the Abbé Domenech are as fabulous as the physical, and their defects are rather negative than positive. The notion of the coast Indians being deficient in muscular power in their legs, arose, Mr Sproat believes, from their legs being always seen uncovered—a severe ordeal for any people. "If the men wore blankets," he asks, "how many presentable

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legs would there be in an ordinary crowd of Englishmen? Imagine a sculptor and a critic questioned, like Mrs Todgers, in presence of a *sans-culotte* House of Commons! The complexion of the Aht people is a dull brown, no duller and no browner than that of the English people would be, if they were perpetually exposed to weather, and if they lived exclusively on oil, blubber, and fish. They swim well, are unrivalled as divers, and bathe every day in the sea, which, though the climate of Vancouver's Island is, on the whole, milder than that of England, is colder than on any part of the shores of Great Britain. The Ahts are much less dirty in their habits than many civilised people; it clashes with one's notions of wild people to find daily ablutions *de rigueur*, and to learn that the women wash themselves, and arrange their hair, after their day's work, like our own house-maids, only more thoroughly. The men wear blankets, since they have been introduced to them; a single garment of bear-skin was the primitive dress: the women wear a kind of shift in addition to the blanket. The head and feet are uncovered, except on canoe-journeys, when hats and capes made of grass are worn. The men are beardless and whiskerless, except at Nootka Sound, where some, supposed to have Spanish blood in them, have large moustaches and whiskers. They are a gentle race, and Mr Sproat observes: 'It is a characteristic of these natives that men sometimes saunter along holding each other's hand in a friendly way; a habit never to be observed in civilised life, except amongst boys, or sailors when intoxicated.'

The natives wear their hair, which is a dark, dull brown, long, and either tied in a bunch on the crown, or hanging loosely under wreaths of grass or feathered bird-skin. The women are careful of their hair, and have little boxes in which they keep combs and looking-glasses. The men are singularly disdainful of ornaments, and such toys as readily tempt the negro, have no charms for the sober-minded Ahts. The women are more like their sex everywhere; they are seldom seen without rings, bracelets, and anklets of beads and brass; their blankets are beautifully ornamented with beads; and a brilliant bit of cockle-shell, or horse-shoe-shaped piece of brass, often adorns their well-formed noses. The teeth of the natives are regular, but stumpy, and deficient in enamel, in consequence of the large seasoning of sand to the dried salmon to which they are accustomed. Tattooing is not practised among the Ahts, and the head-flattening process has fallen much into disuse. 'The traveller,' says Mr Sproat, 'leaves on this side of Cape Scott a people with fine broad, though slightly flattened, foreheads, and heads well set on, and soon finds himself on the north side of the cape, among the Quocquotth nation, a people with disfigured heads, and who speak a different language. The sudden change from vigour to decrepitude, from maturity to age, in these people is very remarkable. As in some climes there is no perceptible twilight, so in their lives there is no intermediate stage in their existence between full manhood and the first steps into age.'

The Ahts have extraordinary strength in their hands, and are fleet of foot, and their skill in managing their canoes cannot be surpassed; but Mr Sproat has seen a crew of Indians beaten by a trained crew of white men in a long canoe-race on the sea. Their method of encampment is very curious and interesting. Their movements follow

those of the salmon, which forms their chief sustenance. Following the lordly fish as they swim up the rivers and inlets, the natives place their summer encampments at some distance from the seaboard, towards which they return for the winter season, about the end of October, with a stock of dried fish. By this arrangement, being near the sea-shore, they can get shell-fish if their supply of salmon runs short, and can also catch the first fish that approach the shore in the early spring. When the purveying-work is done at each place, the camp is broken up, and the putrid heaps of refuse are left to the scavenger services of the elements and the birds. The following description of the method of removing from an encampment makes one regard these wild tribes with wondering admiration. 'Two large canoes are placed about six feet apart, and connected by planks—the sides and roofs of the houses laid transversely upon each other, so as to form a wide deck the whole length of the canoe, space enough for one man being reserved at the bow and stern. On this deck are baskets full of preparations of salmon-roe, dried salmon, and other fish, together with wooden boxes, containing blankets and household articles. The women and children sit in a small space purposely left for them. Each canoe is managed by two men, who, with the women and children, raise a cheery song as they float down the stream. The principal men send slaves or others to prepare their quarters; and among the common people, it is understood beforehand who shall live together at the new encampment. A willing, handy poor man sometimes is invited to live for the winter with a richer family, for whom he works for a small remuneration. The houses of the natives, at their camping-grounds, are large and strongly constructed, built of cedar-wood, 'far superior to the hovels of Connaught, or the mud-cabins in the west of Sutherland,' and very often beautifully situated; not that the natives have any sense of, or feeling for, the beauties of nature; in that respect, they are on a par with all other savages; but that the encampment is arranged with regard to the vicinity of firewood and water, and to getting the advantage of the frequently found fantastic masses of rock which keep off the wind. The picture of these rude houses is not unattractive. The tribes assemble like families, great respect being shewn to the chiefs—for these people have the strictest notions on rank and precedence—and pass the winter evenings in gossiping and dancing. They are given to laughter and joking, and their quarrels are neither many nor virulent; the active form of them being confined to pulling one another's hair. The Ahts are excessively polite, and have an etiquette by which the receiving of guests and visitors, to whom they are most hospitable, is regulated. 'Compared with the manners of English rustics or mechanics,' says Mr Sproat, 'their manners are simple and rather dignified. In meeting out of doors, they have no gesture of salutation; in their houses, it consists of a polite motioning towards a couch.'

Great feasts take place in the winter, of which the whale-feasts are the favourite. An Indian who thinks anything of himself, never gets a deer or a seal, or even a quantity of flour, without inviting his friends to a feast; but the captor of a whale is an Amphitryon of note. The festivities are carried on with much form and dignity, and not only is a plentiful portion assigned to each guest, but the

remains are gathered up by the host's servants, and distributed at the houses of all the company. These feasts conclude, after true Homeric fashion, with bardic recitals of achievements in war and hunting. The cooking of the unctuous meal is singular. 'Hot stones are put, by means of wooden tongs, into large wooden boxes, containing a small quantity of water. When the water boils, the blubber of the whale, cut into pieces about an inch thick, is thrown into these boxes, and hot stones are added until the food is cooked. This imperfect boiling does not extract half the oil from the blubber, but whatever appears is skimmed off, and preserved in bladders to be eaten, as a delicacy, with dried salmon, or with potatoes and other roots.' Silence while eating is considered a mark of politeness; and the host and one of his servants walk round during the meal to see that every one has got his due allowance of blubber, according to his rank. The women are excluded from these feasts, but they do not seem to be in any way ill-treated among the Ahts. As hunting and fishing are their occupations, their outdoor amusements are limited to swimming and some perfectly good-humoured competitive trials of strength. They have some plaintive and some joyous native music, and a grotesque war-dance; also a dramatic performance, called the Nook dance, which is very interesting and characteristic. They are large eaters, like the Mongols, but also, like them, have great power of abstaining from food. Fish of all kinds, ducks, geese, and deer, are their food; and Mr Sproat found out that when, either by the providence natural to the savage, or from real inability to calculate their probable wants, it happens that they are in straits for want of food, and they become weak and thin, they blacken their faces, to hide their altered looks. Surely there is a touch of nobility in this.

They drink nothing but water, and as a corrective of the injurious effects of a continued fish and animal diet, use various plants, in particular the gammass, which grows only in small quantities on the west coast; and though they complain bitterly that the encroachment of the whites is rapidly depriving them of this useful and almost necessary plant, they have never attempted to increase the production of it by any kind of cultivation. They dislike salt, and will not boil potatoes in salt water, even under the pressure of hunger. The Ahts are very fond of bartering, and keen hands at it; and their intertribal trade-laws are numerous, minute, and equitable. Property is common to the tribe. They possess good firearms, and make bows and arrows beautifully. The Nitinahts and the Klah-oh-quahts are famous for their canoe-making, which is unequalled. All the tribes excel in basket-making. The institution of slavery is highly prized, and strictly defined among these people, who, though they have unlimited power over their slaves, and might kill them with complete impunity, rarely treat them otherwise than well. They entertain much dislike and contempt for Chinamen and negroes, whom they believe to be much inferior to themselves. Their customs of courtship and marriage are formal, precise, and just. Of course, wives are purchased after the fashion of savage and civilised people, and rank is regarded as of paramount importance; thus, caste is very strictly maintained. Their idea of blood-relationship, and the duties and responsibilities which it involves, is so strong,

that Mr Sproat declares it to be the principal constituent in the structure of their simple society. Polygamy is not prohibited, but it is very rarely practised.

The Ahts are cold-blooded, vindictive, and suspicious, and their religious rites are sanguinary. Their notions of religion are of a vague and incomprehensible kind, but they have much faith in the efficacy of 'exerting their hearts,' as they call prayer, for obtaining what they desire. They are very fond of their children, and never beat them; but they neglect the sick and the old. They believe in omens and sorcery, and suffer as much from fear of supernatural evil as the most debased of the African tribes. An individual from whom Mr Sproat obtained a good deal of knowledge of the faith and the superstitions of the Ahts, gravely asked him if he had ever seen a soul, and said he had once seen his own, when, at the close of a severe illness, it was brought to him by the sorcerer on a small piece of stick, and thrown into his head. The traditions of their origin cherished by the Ahts are merely grotesque. They are entirely wanting in poetry; and some belief in an after-life is vague, dull, and uninspiring. They do not hope for any other or better kind of existence than that they possess; they fear, but do not aspire to the future, and they cling with melancholy tenacity to life. Hence, their medicine-men, coarse impostors enough, have immense power over them. It is impossible to read about these people, whose life has none of the terrible conditions which make it a relief to know that the Esquimaux will soon cease to exist, and not regret their decay, not wish that wise, powerful, and organised efforts should be made for the good of such of them as remain. The progress of their extinction is strangely rapid. In 1778, Captain Cook rated the population of Nootka village, in Vancouver's Island, at two thousand; and Captain Meares, ten years later, confirmed this estimate, and stated that the population of all the villages in the sound at Nootka amounted to between three and four thousand. 'The aggregate of the population of the sound now is barely six hundred souls, yet the natives have remained in almost a primitive state, only visited occasionally by a ship-of-war or a trading schooner. They have had plenty of food and better clothes than they possessed prior to their knowledge of blankets; and their number has not been lessened by any epidemic, nor by the division or emigration of any portion of the tribes.'